



Written Submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Continuous Assessment in State Examinations

February 2018

The Union of Students in Ireland

The Union of Students in Ireland (Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn) is the national representative body for third-level Students' Unions in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 374,000 students in over forty colleges across the island of Ireland. The goal of USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal third-level education system in Ireland.

USI is a full member of the European Students' Union (ESU) which represents students from 46 National Students' Unions in 39 countries.

USI Response to the use of Continuous Assessment (CA)

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) welcomes the Joint Committee on Education and Skills' investigation of the potential use of the continuous assessment model in State examinations. USI has worked for many years on issues of quality and enhancement of education, primarily at third-level, but has often taken a view of the need for wider educational reform. USI is broadly supportive of efforts to develop continuous assessment at third-level, recognising and championing the need to develop a model of student partnership and is eager to see efforts expand beyond the post-secondary sector. Continuous assessment fosters student agency and complements the ethos of student partnership, engagement, and participation.

Strongly linked to this work is the ongoing national approaches to improve access, student retention, progression through programmes of study, and the ability of students to succeed in their education. Therefore it is imperative that a national, integrated approach is taken to educational reform, across phases, from primary to tertiary. In this submission USI points to some evidence around the need for assessment practices to reflect the experiences of students transitioning to further studies post-secondary.

It should be noted that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

has now begun the process of Senior Cycle Review, aimed at identifying reform and/or enhancements of upper secondary education in Ireland. Any reform at second-level should be considered within the context of transition from one phase of education to another, and it is this need for a holistic approach that USI wishes to highlight to the Committee.

The current process of Review being undertaken by the NCCA does not appear to be robust enough to ensure a wide range of stakeholders and interested parties can give a thorough view of current practice and any need for change. If the Committee is to fundamentally examine and champion the need for developing continuous assessment practices within state examinations, then it must ensure the ongoing work on the Senior Cycle is incorporated and broadened.

As mentioned, USI is broadly supportive of the move to continuous assessment practices. Education in Ireland remains formal and centred on 'high stakes' examinations at the end of the learning process, especially at upper secondary. This practice enforces a model of teaching and learning as preparation for final examinations, and prevents the true fostering of a student interest and engagement with learning and content. The traditional models of teacher-centric classrooms, of rote learning, and assessment for the purpose of measuring knowledge retention, are giving way to more inclusive and innovative practices. Assessment that fosters student agency, formative feedback, and for the purpose of encouraging learning, can have a transformative effect on the quality of education.

With this context in mind, USI is concerned by the questions circulated by the Joint Committee on CA. Any move to a CA model should be predicated on shaping a sense of value, innovation, student-centred learning, and professional development. Furthermore, CA should not be viewed as an international "pressure", rather that it is an internationally recognised best practice. Crucially any consideration of improving State education should first and foremost examine the needs of the student and their teacher, not the needs of Foreign Direct Investors or entirely unrelated issues like Brexit.

Fundamentally it appears that the Submission questions have been identified from a place of under-developed understanding of what CA entails. While USI has attempted to provide answers to the questions, there are a number of key considerations that we believe should be prioritised by the Joint Committee if it is to further develop this important work:

- The Committee should clearly examine and develop an understanding of the value and purpose of models of continuous assessment, including looking at the international practice that is briefly mentioned in the first question;
- The Committee should develop a clear need for wide consultation, that is supported by resource and best practice case studies on continuous assessment;
- The Committee should ensure that there is robust consideration of transition between phases and levels of study, and the benefits of continuous assessment to support such transitions.

What is continuous assessment?

The move toward a model of continuous assessment is becoming more commonplace across education sectors, and is an active consideration of teachers and practitioners globally. However, continuous assessment is not a one-size-fits-all concept, and its development should be considered in national approaches, in individual schools, and in the context of subjects and disciplines.

The key differences between traditional examination and continuous assessment must first be delineated, in that, continuous assessment merely refers to the timing of assessments within a programme, and is a move away from end of study examination. Primarily, continuous assessment represents an opportunity to move beyond the rote learning examination model, and to ensure that assessment fosters learning, rather than is designed to measure it.

The NFETL's most recent enhancement theme examined the three concepts of assessment AS learning, assessment OF learning, and assessment FOR learning. The model of continuous assessment allows all three of these concepts to intertwine and complement one another, moving away from the current focus on assessment OF learning.

The table below produced by the NFETL demonstrates the significant opportunity that CA presents teachers to move away from examination as the primary method of assessment. It should not be assumed that this will automatically create a heavier workload of assessment, or that this will create more pressure on resource and teaching staff. Peer-to-peer activity, online tests, and practical aspects of programmes can mitigate the idea that CA is simply a series of examiner intensive coursework elements.

Table 3 Assessment method categories

Assessment method category	Examples of wording of assessment in module descriptors
Attendance/participation	'participation element', 'attendance at tutorials'
Case study/note	'legal case study', 'case note'
Essay	'written essay', 'essay assignment', 'essay'
Examination	'exam', 'formal exam', 'end of year examination'
In-class test/short answer/quiz	'class test', 'online quiz', 'in-class exam'
Interview/Oral exam	'oral exam', 'interview', 'oral continuous assessment'
Journal/Reflections	'reflection', 'visual diary', 'reflective learning journal'
Lab work/book	'lab report', 'lab workbook', 'laboratory portfolio'
MCQ	'multiple choice test', 'online MCQ', 'MCQ'
Other assessment/assignment	'resource pack', 'image analysis', 'create a blog'
Portfolio	'portfolio', 'placement portfolio'
Practical	'tutorial work', 'practical assignment', 'practical assessment'
Presentation	'group presentation', 'poster presentation', 'presentation'
Project/Dissertation	'FYP submission', 'group project', 'individual project'
Report	'written report', 'report'
Unspecified assessment/assignment	'continuous assessment', 'coursework', 'assignment'
Work practice	'teaching practice', 'placement-based assignment'

Response to Questions posed by the Joint Committee

- 1. In light of the positive international standing the Irish education system currently has, is there international pressures on Ireland to move to a system of Continuous Assessment (CA) simply to be in line with other jurisdictions?**

Reform in education should be viewed through the lense of improvement and enhancement of the learning environment for both students and teachers. Developing a sense of international best practice should help to inform the need for reform at home, while also allowing for critical self-reflection of our current approaches. While the quality of Irish education is internationally recognised, it is incorrect to couch continued improvement or consideration of best practice as unnecessary. A core component of any education system is one that responds proactively to change and suggested enhancement. Furthermore, the PISA 2015 Report¹ demonstrates that there is still significant room for improvement in Irish education, while the performance of Ireland could be considered “stable”.

- 2. Are there benefits to moving to a CA model for State Examinations?**

The many benefits to moving to a CA model for state exams stem from the core values of continuous assessment; student agency and responsibility, peer-to-peer learning, student-centric teaching, and the importance of assessment to nurture learning. Continuous assessment can be best understood as follows: ‘Assessment is often at its best when it represents an ongoing process, involving a continuous interaction between lecturer and student (Evans, 2010).’²

- 3. Are there particular benefits that such a system might have in relation to the well-being of students and reducing the pressure as students approach final exams?**

Ireland largely operates a ‘high stakes’ assessment model which places the emphasis on assessing the learning of the student at the end of the learning process. This model creates barriers to feedback and reflection on the student’s progress, while creating a structure of pupil-teacher engagement based on the need to continually prepare for a set of final examinations. Wellbeing and mental health has become a key focus of both education in Ireland, and internationally. USI has long advocated for improved mental health services, but in parallel, consideration and attention is needed on practices and procedures that create unnecessary pressure on students. The final examination model is one such pressure. Any work on examining student transition across levels should also have significant emphasis on the benefits

¹ An overview of Ireland’s performance in the PISA 2015 Report can be found here:
<http://www.compareyourcountry.org/pisa/country/irl?lg=en>

² Evans, C. (2010). Making sense of assessment feedback in higher education. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(1), 70-120

of continuous assessment to wellbeing.

4. Are there any risks associated with moving to a CA model?

Enhancement of education should not be viewed through a risk-based model, however, insufficient considerations of curriculum development and design, insufficient teacher professional development and support, and a lack of resources can all have a negative impact. These issues of development and implementation are primary examples of the risks that educational reform presents, rather than risks that are specific to CA.

5. Will the CA system affect the perception of the level or calibre of students produced through the Irish education system?

Yes, the international movement towards student centred teaching, learning and assessment can be showcased as an effective CA model for state examinations: 'In order to assess learning outcomes which are not reliant on short term memorising, a range of assessment methods can be used by teachers with clear objectives in mind.'³

Objectives of Continuous Assessment may include:

- Maintain appropriate motivation
- Participate in classwork
- Develop techniques in line with course goals
- Sustain interest or energy
- Relate different tasks to each other.

6. Is there a risk that CA could be used to protect/improve school ranking? Is there a need to include safeguards against such risks? Is an external assessor of the CA model required to deal with the potential for bias?

The need for external assessors or examiners will depend on the specific assessments and curricula that are developed. For example, there are already practices of internally set assessment, especially in the arts. USI does not believe there is significant risk in this regard. Please see the table provided (in the cover letter) as an example of the potential breadth of assessment options and methods, demonstrating the need to understand each assessment and its connection to learning outcomes and programme structure.

In regards to school rankings, any move to CA should be resourced to support the needs of the individual teacher and/or school. An effective model of support, resourcing, and CPD would mitigate against competition between schools. Discouraging opportunistic school ranking is a wider issue that

³ Time for Student Centred Learning. SCL Toolkit 2010, found at:
<https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/100814-SCL.pdf>

should not be linked to a move to CA.

7. How would the Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) fit into a CA model?

The USI does not have specific policy on the LCA, but recognises that the current LCA programme is designed to develop student capacity for self-esteem, responsibility, and to foster skills based on participative learning and personal development. The principles of CA and the LCA have significant overlap, therefore it is not within the realms of possibility to create an Irish approach to CA that can be embedded across secondary education, including the LCA.

8. Is there any risk to FDI should the education system change from its current form to that of CA?

CA is an effective and internationally recognised method of assessment for learning, developed and embedded in individual contexts, and designed to meet key skills and competencies. USI cannot foresee a scenario where a move to a CA model in Irish education would negatively impact FDI. Rather, its successful implementation across secondary level, and clear link to transition to further study, would only benefit society and the economy.

9. Will Brexit have any implications should Ireland decide to pursue a CA model?

USI cannot foresee a scenario where a move to a CA model in Irish education would be in any way impacted by Brexit.

10. Would transitioning to a CA system benefit students in schools with more concentrated levels of disadvantage?

The benefits of moving to a CA system should benefit students in all schools. The current examinations system caters for students with good recall skills but does not promote group work, research skills etc. Considering developments elsewhere, including in the Further Education and Training (FET) and Higher Education (HE) sectors, that are aimed at improving retention and student success through innovative teaching and learning practices, a CA model would help to develop student engagement in knowledge creation from an earlier age. This would undoubtedly foster a more participative environment, and be of benefit to schools with lower rates of student achievement, often as a result of disadvantage and inequality.

11. Will schools with more concentrated levels of disadvantage be able to adjust their teaching practices to a CA model?

All reforms to national structures require resourcing to ensure schools have the appropriate technologies and materials, Principals and policy makers have the best practices and guidelines to follow, and teachers are given the

opportunity and afforded the time to complete relevant CPD.

12. Would a model of CA produce students with both knowledge and skills to equip them for a workforce for the 21st century?

Yes, there are many methods of assessment for learning suitable for continuous timing which foster the development of key skills and knowledge for the 21st century workplace.

13. What are the impacts, if any, to third level education?

Third level education has increasingly moved toward continuous assessment, with curriculum redesign and enhancements embedding CA across disciplines. The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (NFETL) has pioneered research and projects on the transition to third-level and on assessment practices, creating a significant body of evidence on the benefits of CA to student progression, retention, and achievement.

The NFETL Research Report on Transition from Second Level and Further Education to Higher Education denotes key findings on the challenges that students identified from this transition: 'Time management was identified by the students as the most significant element of the transition from second level to higher education. This was followed by a change in the requirements for written assessments, critical thinking and conducting independent research. Other areas identified as challenging included increased personal responsibility, financial and social challenges.'⁴

The purpose of continuous assessment is to develop the competencies and skills of students to critically-engage in their discipline and to create capacity for self-regulation and agency. These skills and competencies should be developed from an earlier stage, in order to more effectively prepare students for environments in which they must act independently and adapt, including further study or work. The use of CA before tertiary-level education would have a positive impact on students who go on to study in Higher Education.

14. Has consultation with parents' representatives and other stakeholders taken place and is there support for exploring the introduction of a CA system?

USI is not aware of any specific consultations with parents representatives on continuous assessment practices. The role parents play in preparing and supporting their children for assessment and examinations can and does have a formative effect. Irish education is focused around 'high stakes' examination, embedding a culture of assessment as a measure of learning,

⁴ The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education's Focused Research Report on *Transition from Second Level and Further Education to Higher Education*, found here: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Research-Report-6-Transitions-from-Second-Level-FE-to-Higher-Education.pdf>

rather than a tool to encourage and improve the learning process. Parents are accustomed to this culture from their own time in education, and therefore it is imperative that there is not only consultation and input from parents from the outset, but that they are also clearly informed about the use of CA, including the principles and learning outcomes of a CA model.

The concept of the “nostalgic curriculum” can create barriers to reform in the current context, and without far-reaching consultation and collaboration with parents and parent representative organisations, an opportunity for parents to embrace CA from the earliest stage of curriculum redesign would be missed.

15. Will the CA model provide training opportunities for teachers to become examiners as part of this new system and are there any other considerations to take into account?

USI does not have a specific expertise on this issue, but as mentioned previously, CPD opportunities are integral to a successful implementation of a CA model.

16. What are the lessons learnt from previous reform introduced through other programs, for example the LCA programme and Project Maths, in relation to introduction of a system of CA?

USI does not have a specific stance on the development of either the LCA or Project Maths. Previous answers outline the need for robust consultation and stakeholder engagement in any educational enhancement and reform.

17. Have any contingency plans been considered if the CA model is introduced and does not have the desired effect?

Please see the answer to question 4 on risk.

Submission Author:

Oisín Hassan

*Vice President for Academic Affairs - Leas Uachtarán do Chursaí Acadúla
The Union of Students in Ireland - Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn*

academicaffairs@usi.ie